



# H1N1 (Swine Flu) – Frequently Asked Questions

Updated 5/6/09

## **Current Status**

### **Are there H1N1 (swine flu) cases in Washington?**

Yes, there are confirmed cases in Washington State. Updated case counts are posted on the Department of Health Web site at [www.doh.wa.gov/swineflu](http://www.doh.wa.gov/swineflu).

### **Where else are there swine flu cases?**

There have been confirmed cases in most states in the United States, as well as in other countries. For current information, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Web site at [www.cdc.gov/swineflu/investigation.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/swineflu/investigation.htm)

### **How serious is this outbreak?**

Because this is a new virus, there are many things we do not yet know. More than 1,000 confirmed and probable cases have been reported in the United States. For comparison, on average, the seasonal influenza that occurs every year in the U.S. puts 200,000 people in the hospital and causes hundreds of thousands of illnesses. It does appear that the new virus is spread as easily as seasonal influenza. The CDC and the Washington State Department of Health are working to measure how serious this outbreak is.

You should expect to see more swine flu cases reported in the coming weeks because health care providers and public health officials everywhere are looking for more flu cases. Additionally, more laboratories have the ability to test samples for swine flu, which means larger numbers of samples will be tested.

### **What is WHO pandemic alert Phase 5?**

In Phase 5 the World Health Organization asks governments to activate their pandemic preparedness plans and to remain on high alert for unusual outbreaks of influenza-like illness and severe pneumonia. It is a signal that government should prepare for a pandemic as quickly as possible. The highest alert level is Phase 6, which means a pandemic is underway. The alert level is based on the amount of flu being reported worldwide, not on the seriousness of the infections.

### **What is the government doing to protect us?**

- Local health departments are working closely with health care providers to investigate cases of influenza-like illness to see if they are due to this new virus.
- Our state laboratory will soon have the ability to test samples for swine flu.
- The Strategic National Stockpile is delivering antiviral medicines and other supplies to each state for use if the outbreak becomes severe.

# **H1N1 (Swine Flu) Basics**

## **What is swine flu?**

In general, swine flu is a respiratory disease in pigs caused by a type A influenza virus. Viruses that cause swine flu do not normally infect humans, although rare human infections have occurred. The swine flu virus we are now concerned with originally came from pigs but combined with other types of viruses to make a new virus that can now be transmitted from person to person.

## **How sick do people get?**

Many people who get swine flu have the same type of symptoms as seasonal flu and recover fully. Just like seasonal flu, however, swine flu can lead to pneumonia, and in some cases, death.

## **What are the symptoms of swine flu?**

Symptoms are similar to those for seasonal influenza. Those symptoms include fever over 100° F, cough, sore throat, body aches and headache. In addition, fatigue, lack of appetite, runny nose, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea can occur.

If you have symptoms of influenza such as fever, cough and sore throat, and are at risk for severe illness (children under two years old; pregnant women; adults over 65 years old; residents of long-term care facilities; people with chronic lung, heart, kidney or liver disease; diabetes; sickle cell anemia; immunosuppression or receiving chemotherapy for cancer), you should contact your health care provider.

Anyone with fever and severe respiratory symptoms such as shortness of breath or difficulty breathing should contact their health care provider.

## **Will this be like the 1918 pandemic and come back stronger in the fall?**

The huge 1918 influenza pandemic resulted in many severe cases and deaths. It's possible this new virus could cause another large pandemic, but we don't know at this point. One of the differences between 2009 and 1918 is that we have more resources available. For example, the federal government is working on a vaccine to treat this flu. In addition to much better health care in hospitals, antiviral medications are available that are effective in treating this flu. We also have better disease surveillance in place to help us monitor this outbreak.

# **How Do People Get Swine Flu?**

## **How do people get swine flu?**

You can become infected by the swine flu virus when someone infected with swine flu coughs or sneezes droplets near you and you take in the virus through your mouth, nose or eyes. You can also get the virus by touching a surface such as a countertop or doorknob that has become contaminated and then touching your mouth, nose or eyes.

## **Can I get swine flu from eating pork, ham, etc.?**

No, you cannot get swine flu in that way. Swine flu is passed from person to person through coughing or sneezing, or by touching a surface that an infected person has coughed or sneezed on and then touching your mouth, nose or eyes.

### **How long can the virus live on a countertop or other surface?**

The virus can live on hard surfaces for at least several hours and possibly more than a day. For that reason, it is important that you wash your hands after coughing or sneezing to avoid passing on the virus.

- For information on cleaning and disinfecting surfaces, see [www.doh.wa.gov/swineflu](http://www.doh.wa.gov/swineflu) - available in English, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, Tagalog, large type

### **How long are people contagious?**

Infected people can infect others beginning one day before symptoms start and up to seven or more days after becoming sick. That means that you may be able to pass on the flu to someone else before you know you are sick, as well as while you are sick. Children, especially younger children, might potentially be contagious for longer periods.

### **How long can you be infected before getting sick (showing symptoms)?**

Not all infected people get sick but, if an infected person develops symptoms, it usually happens 1-7 days after infection.

## **Prevention and Treatment**

### **How do I avoid getting swine flu or infecting others if I have the flu?**

These things are very simple, but they really work:

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it and clean your hands.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. Alcohol-based hand cleaners are also effective.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs spread this way.
- Try to avoid close contact with sick people; don't share glasses or eating utensils.
- Wash a sick person's laundry in hot water and dry it on high. Wear gloves or wash your hands after touching laundry.
- Stay home from work or school if you are sick.

### **Is there a vaccine that can protect me from swine flu?**

- No. There is no vaccine that can protect us against swine flu at this time.
  - The federal government is working on a swine flu vaccine, but it will take many months to develop, test and produce.
- If you are at risk for severe influenza, ask your health care provider about pneumococcal vaccine to prevent the complications of flu.

**Is there medication that can treat swine flu?**

- We believe that antiviral medications can reduce the severity of symptoms.
- The commercial names of the antivirals are Tamiflu (a pill) and Relenza (a nasal spray).
- Antivirals must be prescribed by a health care professional, and should only be used to treat people who are ill AND are at high risk of complications.

**Will this year's seasonal vaccine protect me from swine flu?**

No, this year's seasonal flu vaccine will not protect you from swine flu.

**Should I get vaccinated against seasonal flu anyway?**

Again, seasonal flu vaccine will not protect you from swine flu. Our normal flu season is almost over, but there may still be some benefit to getting the seasonal vaccine.

**Can I use antivirals like Tamiflu and Relenza to avoid getting the swine flu?**

**Tamiflu and Relenza are for treatment, not prevention:**

- We are not sure these drugs can prevent someone from getting the virus.
- If large numbers of people were to take these drugs for prevention, the virus may develop resistance to them and they could no longer be used to treat sick people.
- This disease outbreak could last a long time. If you took these drugs to try to avoid getting sick, you would have to take them possibly for many months.
- Antivirals must be prescribed by a health care professional, and should only be used to treat people who are ill or to prevent illness in high-risk situations.

**Where can I get Tamiflu and Relenza?**

Antivirals must be prescribed by a health care professional, and should only be used to treat people who are ill.

**Does the government have antivirals?**

Federal, state and local governments have supplies of antiviral drugs that they will use to resupply hospitals, doctors' offices and pharmacies to avoid any shortages.

**What if I'm Sick?****What should I do if I get sick?**

Although typical flu symptoms usually do not require medical attention, healthy adults who are not at risk for complications of flu should at least contact their doctor if they have unexplained fever and trouble breathing or if their symptoms are getting worse. If people are at risk for severe influenza (see above), they should at least contact their doctor when they develop symptoms of the flu, including fever and either a cough or sore throat.

If you become very ill with influenza-like symptoms, including fever, body aches, sore throat, vomiting or diarrhea, call your health care provider.

- NOTE – Unless you need urgent medical care, please phone rather than going directly to a doctor's office, clinic or hospital. Your health care provider will determine whether influenza testing or treatment is needed.

If you are sick, you should stay home and avoid contact with other people as much as possible to keep from infecting others.

### **Seek urgent medical care if...**

**In children**, emergency warning signs that need urgent medical attention include:

- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish skin color
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Not waking up or not interacting
- Being so irritable that the child does not want to be held
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough
- Fever with a rash

**In adults**, emergency warning signs that need urgent medical attention include:

- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
- Sudden dizziness
- Confusion
- Severe or persistent vomiting

## **Strategic National Stockpile**

### **What is the SNS (Strategic National Stockpile)?**

The SNS is a federal program that stores large amounts of emergency medications and supplies. The SNS distributes these medications and supplies to states that ask for them during emergencies.

- In the case of antivirals, every state has been allotted a preset amount. Each state has now received 25 percent of its allotment.
- In our state, we distribute our SNS antivirals to local health departments based on population.
- Local governments will use SNS supplies only to re-supply pharmacies, doctors' offices and hospitals if they run out of their current supply.

### **Will there be enough antivirals for everyone?**

Our state will receive enough antiviral drugs from the SNS to treat 230,000 sick people. The state and some counties have additional antiviral supplies in storage, and most hospitals and pharmacies have supplies already on hand. Again, antivirals should only be used to treat people who are sick.

## **Travel**

### **Is the swine flu we're seeing in the U.S. the same as the swine flu in Mexico?**

Yes, it is. The CDC has determined that the swine flu virus causing illness in some states and other countries is the same strain as the virus causing an outbreak of respiratory illness among humans in Mexico.

### **Is it safe to travel to Mexico?**

The CDC advises that people avoid all nonessential travel to Mexico.

- If you are traveling anywhere follow the same precautionary measures that are recommended to protect against seasonal influenza—frequent hand washing, covering coughs and sneezes, and staying home when ill.

### **For further travel recommendations:**

<http://wwwn.cdc.gov/travel/contentSwineFlu.aspx>

### **Should I ask my doctor for antiviral medication if I must travel to Mexico?**

Antiviral medications are recommended only for travelers from the United States going to Mexico who are **at high risk for severe illness** from influenza (for example, people with chronic conditions such as diabetes, lung disease and heart disease, and the elderly). Ask your doctor if you should use antiviral drugs to prevent infection while traveling to Mexico. Always seek medical care if you are severely ill.

### **Are people being allowed to travel from Mexico to the U.S.?**

Yes, they are. The border is currently open.

## **Schools**

### **Is it safe for my kids to go to school?**

The decision to close schools is a local decision that is made by your local school district and your local health department. At this time, the CDC recommends the primary means to reduce spread of influenza in schools is to focus on early identification of ill students and staff, staying home when ill, and good cough and hand hygiene etiquette.

- School closure status and other information for and about schools in the state from the **Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction:**  
<http://www.k12.wa.us/>

## **Masks**

### **Should I buy masks? Should I wear a mask?**

Wearing a mask does not guarantee that you will be protected from the swine flu virus. You will be much better protected if you wash your hands frequently and avoid sick people. In areas with confirmed cases of swine flu, if you are at risk for severe flu, avoid crowds and stay at least six feet from those who are coughing and sneezing.

Wearing a mask when you are ill and coughing can reduce your ability to give the infection to someone else.

### **What kind of mask works best?**

Masks are usually disposable, certified by the FDA and labeled as surgical, dental, medical procedure, isolation or laser masks. If properly used, they should stop influenza transmission due to the droplets resulting from an infectious sneeze or cough.

Wear a **mask** when close contact with an infectious person is unavoidable—for example, if you must care for a sick person such as a family member with a respiratory infection.

In some settings, nurses, doctors and other health care providers wear a **respirator** when there is a risk that virus is present in the air (aerosol). This usually only occurs when a sick person with a respiratory infection is being suctioned or given nebulizer treatments. Respirators are not necessary for the general public; however, if you are suctioning or giving nebulizer treatments to someone with flu at home, you should consider wearing a respirator.

A respirator should be labeled N95 or higher by the U.S. National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH).

Make sure that your face mask or respirator fits snugly on your face. Be sure to dispose of used masks or respirators and wash your hands after touching or taking off your mask.

## **Cleaning and Disinfecting**

### **Cleaning and disinfecting surfaces:**

- Keep hard surfaces like kitchen countertops, tabletops, desktops and bathroom surfaces clean and disinfected.
- Keep surfaces touched by more than one person clean and disinfected. Examples of these surfaces include doorknobs, refrigerator door handles and microwaves.
- Use disposable sanitizer cloths or disinfectant on a towel to wipe electronic items that are touched often, such as phones, computers, remote controls and hand-held games.

### **When surfaces are not visibly dirty**

- Clean the surface with a commercial product that is both a detergent (cleans) and a disinfectant (kills germs). These products can be used when surfaces are not visibly dirty.

### **When surfaces are visibly dirty**

- Wash the surface with a general household cleaner (soap or detergent), rinse with water and follow with a disinfectant. This method should be used for visibly dirty surfaces.

**More cleaning information:** [www.doh.wa.gov/swineflu](http://www.doh.wa.gov/swineflu)

## **Other Questions**

### **Can my pet get swine flu?**

Currently, there is not enough information to fully assess the health implications of this novel strain of flu virus for animals. There is no evidence at this time that swine in the United States are infected with this flu virus strain.

- It is very unlikely that dogs, cats or horses would become infected with this virus.
- It may be possible for a pet monkey (nonhuman primate) and for pet swine and ferrets to become infected with this new virus from a human. For more information on how to protect your pet swine, please visit the following Web sites:

### **More information:**

U.S. Department of Agriculture [www.usda.gov](http://www.usda.gov)

The National Pork Board Web site also provides related information for pork producers or commercial swine owners: [www.pork.org](http://www.pork.org)

### **Is it OK to eat fruits and vegetables from Mexico?**

Yes, it is OK to eat them. The virus will not survive on produce for the time it takes to ship it here. Always wash fruit and vegetables before eating.

### **Can I get swine flu from drinking water?**

No, you can't catch the virus from drinking properly disinfected tap water, even if the water was originally drawn from a source that had been in contact with infected people or animals. Since groundwater sources are not exposed to the virus, water from wells or springs, even if not disinfected, would not directly lead to an infection.

However, drinking water cups or glasses used by people who have been diagnosed as having, or show symptoms of, the flu **should not be used by others.**